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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001788

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: MOPS PGOV PREL FR LE SY
SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SAYS FRENCH INITIATIVE KEY TO SUCCESS
FOR MARCH 14

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).
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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During a November 14 meeting with the Ambassador, Prime Minister Siniora expressed his thoughts on how March 14 could out-maneuver the opposition and ultimately choose a strong consensus candidate by supporting the French initiative. Siniora said that Patriarch Sfeir's list is the key to this strategy and he should be encouraged to include at least one candidate who supports March 14 principles, which include support for Lebanon's sovereignty and independence and the implementation of UNSCRs. Siniora added that if this were done, the opposition will be painted into a corner and forced to either accept the French initiative or reject it outright, which would demonstrate to the international community the opposition's true goal to install a weak president under Syrian influence. Siniora also said that the security situation would be of the utmost importance if there is no President after November 24, stating that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) would have to be brought in to make sure that law and order are maintained throughout the country. End Summary.

PATRIARCH'S TIME TO SHINE

¶2. (C) The Ambassador and PolOff met with Prime Minister Siniora and his advisors Ambassador Mohammed Chatah and Rola Noureddine on November 14 in the PM's office. Siniora was in a particularly engaging mood as he strategized on how best to utilize the French initiative to elect a candidate who supports March 14 principles. Siniora believes that the Patriarch's list of possible presidential candidates is the key to this strategy, adding that the Patriarch "is the only game in town." Chatah said that in his meetings with the Patriarch, Sfeir indicated that any candidate requiring a constitutional amendment would be disqualified from his list, undoubtedly referring to LAF Commander, General Michel Sleiman (and possibly Central Bank Governor Salameh, whose name was not mentioned by Chatah but is surely on arch-rival Siniora's mind). Chatah added that the Patriarch indicated his opposition to any pro-Syrian candidates (Note: The Ambassador pondered how exactly the Patriarch would define a pro-Syrian candidate. End Note).

¶3. (C) Siniora reiterated his own opposition to any candidates requiring a constitutional amendment and to any pro-Syrian candidates. Siniora then stated that the Patriarch must be required to publicly produce a list of names to Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri and parliament majority leader Saad Hariri who, in theory, would both then select one of the names from the list to present to parliament for election as a consensus candidate. Siniora thought Berri would have already requested that the Patriarch submit this list, but to his surprise Berri had not.

SINIORA: FRENCH INITIATIVE IS THE BEST OPTION FOR MARCH 14

¶4. (C) Siniora also stated that he had spoken with March 14 members at their November 12 strategy meeting. Siniora advised March 14 members to cooperate with the French initiative and to avoid taking any steps that would jeopardize the plan or discourage the Patriarch from giving his list to Berri and Hariri. Chatah added that it was important for international consensus to show that March 14 made an effort to achieve consensus by pursuing the French initiative.

¶5. (C) Siniora added that Boutros Harb and Nassib Lahoud would both withdraw their candidacies if their names are not on the Patriarch's list, but that Michel Aoun definitely would not take such a step. Siniora believes that March 14 is willing to accept any of the non-"big three" candidates if the candidate respects and supports the March 14 principles. Siniora added if such a candidate exists, March 14 should sacrifice someone, such as Nassib Lahoud. However, Siniora then swore that "Nassib is the best." Siniora believes even one good name could be enough to resolve the crisis and added that "March 14 should support the French initiative because if they do not, there will only be continued stalemate."

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NOT THE USUAL SUSPECTS

¶6. (C) Siniora offered up his thoughts on a second list of second-tier names, stating that candidates such as Michel Edde, Robert Ghanem, Joseph Torbey, and Sheikh Michel Khoury are all viable names that could appear on the Patriarch's list. When the Ambassador pondered who on the list would be supported by March 14, the only acceptable candidate for Siniora and his advisors was Michel Khoury. Siniora added that Khoury would be acceptable to Christians and that a candidate such as Khoury "will bring back decency to the presidency because he respects the constitution and has no other overarching agendas." Siniora also added if Nabih Berri rejected Michel Khoury as a candidate, it would be obvious to everyone that the opposition doesn't want a consensus candidate but rather a weak president.

¶7. (C) The Ambassador noted his concern that someone like Michel Edde could prompt Aoun to make a move for the presidency, because Aoun would argue that a candidate like Edde is not supported by the majority of Christians. Siniora also said if the French initiative fails then Aoun will say that he is the only game in town. The Ambassador added that Christian leader Samir Geagea told him that if a weak president is imposed upon the Christians by Nabih Berri and Saad Hariri, he will be forced to switch his support to Michel Aoun in order to ensure that the Christian community is fairly represented. Therefore, Siniora responded, Hariri should say no to anyone not acceptable to March 14 Christians in order to avoid such a split within March 14.

FRENCH INITIATIVE PUTS BERRI BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

¶8. (C) Siniora stated his belief that the French initiative

"sandwiches" Berri in between his desire to do something to show that he is not under the control of Hizballah, while at the same time he tries to remain on Syria's good side. Siniora said, "If Berri rejects consensus by rejecting the Patriarch's list and does not convene Parliament for a vote in order to try and halt Parliament from voting for a candidate from the Patriarch's list, the international community will clearly see that the opposition does not want a real consensus candidate." Chatah added that if the Parliament is convened, March 14 could choose to pursue the 50 percent plus 1 option and vote for one of the stronger candidates from the Patriarch's list in the absence of an agreement between Berri and Hariri on the Patriarch's list of candidates. Siniora noted that he does not fully support the 50 1 option and added that such a move would require approval from the Patriarch, which would be difficult. Chatah said that in his view the French initiative is a European test for the Syrians, stating that "if Berri does not play and the Syrians do not play, but we do, the world we see that March 14 tried to make an effort." The Ambassador added that Berri may not mind being cornered and Siniora stated that Berri's role is being erased by Hizballah, as evidenced in Nasrallah's November 11 speech.

HIZBALLAH'S STRATEGY TOWARDS THE FRENCH INITIATIVE

¶9. (C) Chatah stated that, in his view, it is possible that Hizballah has gone beyond its desire to only see Michel Aoun or Michel Sleiman occupy Baabda palace and that there are other carrots Hizballah may seek out in connection to the French initiative. Chatah believed that Hizballah may trade the presidency for certain cabinet appointments and high-ranking LAF positions, placing Hizballah in a position to reward Syria in the future. However, Chatah said that Hizballah would set certain conditions first on the type of candidate that would or would not be acceptable to them. The Ambassador added that this is why there is a need to act now to persuade the Patriarch to produce his list before Hizballah sets any pre-conditions which may cause the Patriarch to alter his original list in favor of weaker candidates to appease Hizballah and avoid any potential violence (Note: A list of candidates that is more acceptable to Hizballah may be unacceptable to March 14, which will make March 14 look uncooperative by not supporting the Patriarch's list. Siniora added that Hizballah will set conditions no matter what. End Note.)

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SINIORA READY TO ASSUME EMERGENCY POWERS IF PRESIDENTIAL VACUUM EXISTS

¶10. (C) The Ambassador asked Siniora about contingency planning in case there is no president. Siniora stated that his government is prepared to uphold its responsibilities assigned by the constitution if no president is elected. Siniora added that first the Patriarch would need to evaluate the situation and decide whether or not he could accept a vacuum. Siniora said the security situation would be of the utmost importance, stating that the LAF would have to be brought in to make sure that law and order are maintained in the country. Siniora noted that he does not want the LAF to focus on protecting one side from the other, but rather focus on stopping anyone throughout Lebanon who uses violence as a threat. Siniora added that he will reach out in the coming days to embrace the LAF and encourage them to do this.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) In Siniora's view it would be best for the U.S. to not show over-enthusiasm for the French initiative. Siniora also stated that the USG should push Hariri to keep pressure on the Patriarch for his list of presidential candidates

before he gets intimidated by Hizballah saber rattling. If March 14 does not accept the French initiative, it will lead to stalemate and a vacuum in Baabda Palace. If this happens, it could give President Emile Lahoud an opening to remain in power and set up a second government, an outcome we thought long buried. However, after Nasrallah's speech indirectly threatened Lahoud and demanded that he stay in power if a consensus is not reached or else risk seeing everything he has achieved go to waste, the second government card may actually have snuck back on the table. End Comment.

FELTMAN